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The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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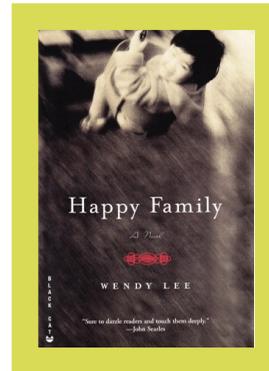
Book Review

Happy Family

By Wendy Lee

Publisher Grove/Atlantic 2008

Reviewed by Amy Klatzkin



Spoiler Alert

It is impossible to address the portrayal of adoption in this book without revealing what happens in the final chapters. If you don't want to know the ending in advance, please read the book first.

In this lyrical and disquieting first novel, Wendy Lee reflects on the movement of human beings across oceans and cultures, races and socioeconomic divides to connect, however imperfectly, with a shared fate. Lee, a young Chinese American writer, looks at two ways Chinese now come to America—by choice and by adoption—and explores how these different paths to the same destination affect identity, family, and belonging. For the narrator of *Happy Family*, the line between adoptee and immigrant blurs. Fate expels both from the land of their birth and shuts the door behind them: “For anything different to have happened, the entire course of history would have to be changed.”

Above all, *Happy Family* is a character study of Hua Wu, a young undocumented Chinese immigrant from Fujian province who finds work at a restaurant in New York's Chinatown. Isolated even there by linguistic barriers (Hua speaks Mandarin, her co-workers Cantonese), she ventures into the prosperous foreign world of the Upper West Side, where at a neighborhood park she spies a lone Chinese toddler, Lily, and her white American adoptive mother, Jane. Immediately identifying with Lily, Hua inserts herself into their lives.

Like Lily, Hua is an orphan putting down roots in a foreign land. She is fascinated by Lily's adoptive family, surprised to see the attachment between Lily and her white parents, and stunned by the cornucopia of stuff in Jane's home and Lily's toy box. Soon Hua quits her job at the restaurant to become Lily's nanny. She fills the emptiness of her own life with projections about Jane's, only to discover that the marriage at the heart of this “happy family” is cracking apart.

Lee creates a rich inner voice for Hua, filled with echoes from her past and longing for a better, more connected, less fate-driven future. Hua confronts the diversity of the Chinese diaspora, the difficult recent past of her homeland, and the lifelong impact of losing parents, even ones she hardly knew. The ghosts of Hua's dead parents and Lily's unknown ones haunt the book.

As she moves through New York City, Hua notices the pecking order of race and class: the dark-skinned nannies of white children in the park, white men with serial Asian girlfriends, white women squeezing round figures into slender qipao, Chinese language and culture as fad. “Mandarin-speaking nannies are a hot commodity on the Upper West Side,” Jane tells her.

Indeed, cultural appropriation permeates the book. Jane, a curator at the Museum of Asian Art, has filled her home with beautiful Chinese objects. Hua recalls a teacher's warning that “Americans had no culture so they are always trying to take on the culture of others. [She] wondered when Jane's interest in China extended to adopting a baby.” Hua zeroes in on the irreducible paradox of international adoption: “Lily needed parents and Jane and her husband needed a child. But foreigners were forever meddling in business that wasn't theirs, taking things that didn't belong to them.”

Hua too takes things that don't belong to her. At first she steals little things from Jane—a white pebble, a swipe of makeup, a splash of perfume. Later, she steals Lily.

Here the novel takes a disturbing turn. Leaving with Hua at night on an unexpected cross-country bus ride, Lily is eerily passive. When an attached toddler is separated from parents, even in the company of a familiar nanny, she will eventually object, then cry, then tantrum. Early in the book Hua observes clear signs of healthy attachment, such as Lily's preference

for her mother over Hua and her delight as she runs into her father's arms. Yet once removed from the only home she can remember, Lily shows no emotion. She asks about her mommy but never cries for her.

This little girl at the heart of the novel is oddly undeveloped as a character—part literary device, part screen for the adults' projections. Any parent of a two-year-old knows that children this age have distinct personalities and temperaments. Lily has neither. In fact, she becomes less distinct as the novel progresses. Lily's lack of distress on separation from her parents may reflect the author's inexperience with young children or it may signal the belief that transracial family bonds are easily broken. That belief is painful to adoptive parents, but it is widely shared. A blurb on the back of *Happy Family* asserts that this child is "closer to [Hua] than its legal mother." By virtue of their shared origins, Hua too decides that Lily belongs with her. She bundles her up and takes off.

The adults Hua meets along the way who realize Hua is not Lily's mother don't call the police. This is a kidnapping, not a trip to the zoo, yet the word is never mentioned. Is it because Lily is "only" an adopted daughter that no one treats her abduction as a crime?

Hua worries occasionally that the police might pursue her, but it seems they never do. She ends up not in prison but in California, watching the sun set over the Pacific, China invisible on the far shore. She left Lily halfway across the country; presumably the child is home now. Hua imagines that Lily's parents would not only forgive her but thank her for "loving" Lily "as much as they did." Is she mad? No matter what you think of international adoption, kidnapping is not an act of love.

Or is it? Internationally adopted children are removed from everything they've ever known and handed over to complete strangers who take them on a long journey to an unfamiliar place. Family building is only one part of the story. Scholars in receiving and sending countries alike increasingly regard international adoption as part of a complex dynamic of politics, economics, race, class, culture, identity, and kinship. Tobias Hübinette, a Korean adoptee and academic in Sweden, concludes that "intercountry adoption has always worked for the interests of adoptive parents and receiving countries, never for the interests of adopted children or supplying countries."

It is hard for us adoptive parents to accept that our act of love can be viewed as an act of injustice, whether by an adult adoptee or an American-born Chinese writer. Our children were abandoned, we protest. It's all because of China's "one-child policy"—that's where the injustice is. We built our families through intercountry adoption, sure, but we also gave a family and a home to a child who had lost both. We could never in a million years equate Lily's adoption from China with her abduction from New York.

One day, though, Lily might.

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